



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ART. V.—*Description of an Execution at Canton, by T. T. MEADOWS, ESQ., Translator and Interpreter to Her Majesty's Consulate.*

THE place used as the execution-ground at Canton is in the southern suburbs, about midway between the forts known to foreigners as the Dutch and French "Follies." It is, however, some distance back from the river, being about halfway between the southern wall of the city, running parallel to the river, and the latter; distant from each 120 or 130 yards in a straight line. There is no street leading directly to it either from the river or the city. There is a dense population all around, composed, towards the north and west, of the inmates of shops and dwellings, respectable in its immediate neighbourhood, and getting more wealthy as the foreign factories (distant about a mile) are approached. To the south and east the suburb is, generally speaking, poor, inhabited by low and even criminal classes. The execution-ground itself is a short thoroughfare or lane, running north and south, about fifty yards in length, eight yards in breadth at its northern end, and gradually narrowing to five yards at its southern extremity, where the projection of a house-corner reduces it to a mere passage of one yard and a half in width, and five in length. At the end of this latter is a high strong door, closed and guarded during executions. The eastern side of the ground is bounded in its whole length by a dead brick wall, of about twelve feet high, forming the back of some dwellings or small warehouses. Against this wall, at about an equal distance from each extremity of the lane, a rack is erected, always containing a number of human heads in different stages of decomposition. Further towards the north end a shed runs along a portion of it, in which the executioners, &c. stand while awaiting the appearance of the criminals. The western side is composed of a row of workshops, where the coarsest description of unglazed earthenware is made. The doors and the small openings, which serve as windows to these places, open into the lane, which when no execution is going on, is partially filled with their earthen manufactures, drying in the sun. The narrow passage, at the southern end of the lane, leads into a filthy square, surrounded by similar pottery workshops; while its northern end is crossed at right angles by a tolerably decent street. The portion of this latter which is open to the lane has a tiled roof carried over it, and under the shed so formed the superintending mandarins sit during executions, the shop

behind being closed, and the street on both sides blocked up by their attendants. A screen being placed between them and the sufferers, they never actually see what passes.

In this lane, not larger than the deck of a hulk, and almost surrounded by dead brick walls, upwards of four hundred human beings have been put to death during the past eight months of the present year. It is fetid with the stench of decomposing heads, and rank with the steams raised by the hot sun from a soil saturated with human blood. Sometimes the bodies of such criminals as have friends, are allowed to remain till these remove them for burial. The first time I entered the place I found four bodies so left, lying in various attitudes as they had fallen, their heads near them, and two pigs moving among them, busily feeding in the pools of blood that had gushed from the trunks. At the distance of about seven yards, and facing this scene, a woman sat at the door of one of the pottery workshops, affectionately tending a child on her knees, of one or two years old: both stared hard, not at a sight so common as pigs feeding among human bodies on human blood, but at the strangely-dressed foreigners.

Having heard, on the evening of the 29th July, 1851, that thirty-four rebels or bandits were to be executed on the following day between eight and ten o'clock, I went to the ground at about half past eight with two English residents at Canton, who had not previously witnessed any execution. We found only a few of the lowest official attendants on the spot. A hole in the ground, near to which a rough cross leant against the wall, showed me that one man at least was going to suffer the highest legal punishment, cutting-up alive, called *ling che*, "a disgraceful and lingering death." A few steps in advance of the shed at the north end, under which the mandarins sit, a fire of fragrant sandal-wood billets was burning on the ground. Knowing that it was customary to exclude at the time of executions, all but the officials from the place, I deemed it advisable to prepare for maintaining our ground by taking up a position on a heap of dry rubbish in the southern corner of the lane, from which slightly elevated stand we should, besides, have the best view of the proceedings. After waiting thus a long time, making liberal distributions of eau-de-cologne over our handkerchiefs and jacket collars, the main body of officials at length began to arrive. The cross was placed and secured in the hole prepared for it, and the police runners began beating out the refractory of the crowd with split rattans. One man motioned to us to leave, but on my telling him quietly in Mandarin that we should not do so unless specially required by the officers, we were no more interfered with. The door at the southern end was now closed, and a

guard stationed within; soon after which the criminals were brought in, the greater number walking, but many carried in large baskets of bamboo attached each to a pole and borne by two men. We observed that the strength of the men so carried was altogether gone, either from excess of fear or the treatment they had met with during their imprisonment and trial. They fell powerless together as they were tumbled out on the spots where they were to die. They were immediately raised up to a kneeling position and supported thus by the man who stands behind each criminal. The following is the manner of decapitation. There is no block, the criminal simply kneels with his face parallel to the earth, thus leaving his neck exposed in a horizontal position. His hands, crossed and bound behind his back, are grasped by the man behind, who, by tilting them up, is enabled in some degree to keep the neck in the proper position. Sometimes, though very rarely, the criminal resists to the last by throwing back his head. In such cases a second assistant goes in front and taking the long Chinese tail or queue (otherwise rolled into a knot on the criminal's head) by dragging at it pulls the head out horizontally.

The executioner stands on the criminal's left. The sword ordinarily employed is only about three feet long, inclusive of a six-inch handle, and the blade is not broader than an inch and a half at the hilt, narrowing and slightly curving towards the point. It is not thick; and is in fact the short and by no means heavy sabre worn by the Chinese military officers when on duty. The executioners, who are taken from the ranks of the army, are indeed *very frequently* required by the officers to "flesh their maiden swords" for them; which is called *kac kow*, "opening the edge," and is supposed to endue the weapon with a certain power of killing. The sabre is firmly held with both hands, the right hand in the front, with the thumb projecting over and grasping the hilt. The executioner, with his feet firmly planted some distance apart, holds the sabre for an instant at the right angle to the neck about a foot above it in order to take aim at a joint: then, with a sharp order to the criminal of "Don't move!" he raises it straight before him as high as his head, and brings it rapidly down with the full strength of both arms, giving additional force to the cut by dropping his body perpendicularly to a sitting posture at the moment the sword touches the neck. He never makes a second cut, and the head is seldom left attached even by a portion of the skin, but is severed completely.

On the present occasion thirty-three of the criminals were arranged in rows with their heads towards the south, where we were standing. In the extreme front the narrowness of the ground only left space for

one man at about five yards from us: then came two in a row, then four, five, &c. At the back of all, about twenty-five yards from us, the chief criminal, a leader of a band, was bound up to the cross. The executioner, with the sleeves of his jacket rolled up, stood at the side of the foremost criminal. He was a well-built vigorous-looking man of the middle size: he had nothing of the ferocious or brutal in his appearance, as one is led to suspect, but on the contrary had good features and an intelligent expression. He stood with his eye fixed on the low military officer, who was the immediate superintendent, and as soon as the latter gave the word *pan!*¹ "punish!" he threw himself into the position above described, and commenced his work. Either from nervousness or some other cause he did not succeed in severing the first head completely, so that after it fell forward with the body the features kept moving for a while in ghastly contortions. In the mean time the executioner was going rapidly on with his terrible task. He appeared to get somewhat excited, flinging aside a sword after it had been twice or thrice used, seizing a fresh one held ready by an assistant, and then throwing himself by a single bound into position by the side of his next victim. I think he cut off thirty-three heads in somewhat less than three minutes, all but the first being completely severed. Most of the trunks fell forward the instant the head was off; but I observed that in some three or four cases, where the criminals were men apparently possessing their mental and physical faculties in full strength, the headless bodies stood quite upright, and would I am certain have sprung into the air had they not been retained by the man behind; till, the impulse given in the last instant of existence being expended, a push threw them forwards to their heads. As soon as the thirty-three were decapitated the same executioner proceeded, with a single-edged dagger or knife, to cut up the man on the cross, whose sole clothing consisted of his wide trousers, rolled down to his hips and up to his buttocks. He was a strongly-made man, above the middle size, and apparently about forty years of age. The authorities got him by seizing his parents and wife, when he surrendered, as well to save them from torture as to secure them the seven thousand dollars offered for his apprehension. The mandarins, having future cases in mind, rarely break faith on such occasions. As the man was at the distance of twenty-five yards with his side towards us, though we observed the two cuts across the forehead, the cutting-off of the left breast, and slicing of the flesh from the front of the thighs, we could

¹ In the language of criminal procedure this word means "to punish;" in ordinary language its signification is "to do," "to transact," &c.

not see all the horrible operation. From the first stroke of the knife till the moment the body was cut down from the cross and decapitated, about four or five minutes elapsed. We should not have been prohibited from going close up, but as may be easily imagined, even a powerful curiosity was an insufficient inducement to jump over a number of dead bodies and literally wade through pools of blood to place ourselves in the hearing of the groans indicated by the heaving chest and quivering limbs of the poor man. Where we stood we heard not a single cry; and I may add that of the thirty-three men decapitated no one struggled or uttered any exclamation as the executioner approached him.

Immediately after the first body fell I observed a man put himself in a sitting posture by the neck, and with a business-like air commence dipping in the blood a bunch of rush pith. When it was well saturated he put it carefully by on a pile of the adjacent pottery, and then proceeded to saturate another bunch. This so-saturated rush pith is used by the Chinese as a medicine. When all the executions were over, a lad of about fifteen or sixteen, an assistant or servant I presume of the executioner, took a sabre, and placing one foot on the back of the first body, with the left hand seized hold of the head (which I have already said was not completely cut off) and then *sawed* away at the unsevered portion of the neck till he cut through it. The other bodies were in the mean time being deposited in collins of unplanned deal boards. When that was nearly finished, the southern door being opened, we hastened to escape from a sight which few will choose to witness a second time without a weighty special cause. Some years back it fell to my lot to be ordered by Sir John Davis, at that time Her Majesty's Plenipotentiary in China, to witness officially, in company with a detachment of troops, the execution of four Chinese, for the murder of British subjects; and it was in a great measure as a matter of duty that I went to the execution just described, being desirous to insure myself in some degree to these sights (which I may be called upon to witness officially) as well as to watch closely the ordinary legal mode of procedure.

T. T. M.

22nd August, 1851.